

How activists take the fight Canada-wide; Nationwide network makes issue a firestorm politicians can't ignore

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Body

Major railway shutdowns are being predicted around the country. There are sit-ins and street protests blocking major intersections in Toronto. Ports being tied up in Vancouver.

How has an Indigenous group's decade-long fight become a national cri de coeur?

First there is the cause: The Wet'suwet'en hereditary chiefs' crusade against a proposed pipeline on their territory. But the second part of the answer lies with a national network of activists, who cut their teeth organizing Canada's largest climate marches. They have helped turned the Wet'suwet'en hereditary chiefs' message into a firestorm that politicians suddenly cannot ignore.

By Tuesday, protest groups across Canada had blocked rail lines at six locations from British Columbia to Nova Scotia, forced a meeting with Carolyn Bennett, Canada's Minister of Crown-Indigenous relations - by occupying her office for 24 hours - and attempted to block B.C.'s legislators from entering their Parliament building on the day of the speech from the throne.

The stream of protests are over Coastal GasLink's 670-kilometre natural gas pipeline from British Columbia's northeast to Kitimat on the coast, which is opposed by hereditary chiefs of the Wet'suwet'en, one of the Indigenous groups with territory along the pipe's planned route.

The hereditary chiefs have said they will do everything they can to stop Coastal GasLink from building a gas pipeline through Wet'suwet'en territory, even if that means breaking a B.C. court injunction granted Dec. 31, 2019. Mounties have arrested 28 protesters in Wet'suwet'en territory in recent days, according to B.C. RCMP.

But unlike last winter, when a similar temporary injunction was enforced by the RCMP, this was no longer just a local struggle. Climate activists from across the country - galvanized by months of climate strikes and naming colonialism and capitalism as major villains in the plight of climate change - have taken up the hereditary chiefs' message as the embodiment of everything they believe is wrong with Canada's approach to the environment.

Smogelgem, head chief of the Sun house of the Likhts'amisyu clan of the Wet'suwet'en, said it has been a long time coming.

"This has already become a global movement to reclaim our planet, and reclaim it so it does not kill us," Smogelgem said Tuesday. "Because it will."

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The Coastal GasLink pipeline will supply a \$40-billion LNG Canada export facility in Kitimat. The company has signed agreements with all 20 elected First Nation councils along its path, but hereditary clan chiefs of the Wet'suwet'en nation, who are leaders under the traditional form of governance, say the project has no authority without their consent and are attempting to block its progress despite the injunction.

They're not fighting alone.

When the B.C. Supreme Court granted Coastal GasLink the injunction late last year, the nation's climate activists were swiftly "put on notice" that the injunction may soon be enforced by the police, and were told to get ready to protest. The key link was a group called the Porcupine Warriors - a collective of Indigenous youth based in Toronto who speak out about environmental issues. Some of their members were on scene at the blockades in Wet'suwet'en territory. Vanessa Gray, an Aamjiwnaang First Nation member based in Toronto, was in touch with Wet'suwet'en members when the injunction was granted to the company.

"It's always a concern when police are arresting matriarchs, when the police are sending helicopters over the healing centre, when police use intimidation tactics on an unarmed, peaceful Indigenous people," Gray said Tuesday. "And so it's a lot of collaboration with other Toronto groups ... to work with non-Indigenous allies to put these events together."

Gray has connected with activists such as Clement Cheung who organizes with Rising Tide and Climate Justice Toronto. These groups have used the contacts and strategies they gained during climate protests to organize protests supporting the hereditary chiefs in Toronto's financial district, and at the local offices of Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland and Bennett.

Cheung, who said he offered his perspective to the Star as a settler youth, said youth activism in Canada has evolved a lot in the last year to the point that young supporters are ready and eager to get out for the Wet'suwet'en chiefs.

"Since January 2019 when the first invasion happened, we saw the eruption of the youth global climate movement," Cheung said. "When we really needed to be a coherent and powerful and unified voice ... this all came together."

That includes "hubs" of climate activist groups across the country, Cheung said, and a trove of young people trained in skills like phone banking and organizing demonstrations.

And this new generation of climate activists see the issues of Indigenous rights and the environment as intertwined.

"If we want to effectively halt the climate crisis we need to stand up to colonial violence," he said. "We show up for the climate by showing up for Indigenous struggles."

In Toronto, more than 100 protesters blocked a rail line on Saturday, stopping at least 68 trains between Toronto and Montreal as well as Toronto and Ottawa. The blockade affected more than 14,000 customers, according to Via. In Regina on Saturday, a driver plowed through a group of protesters who had formed a blockade on the Albert Street Bridge.

Since Thursday evening, when demonstrators set up blockades in British Columbia and Ontario, CN says more than 150 freight trains have been halted. The ongoing blockades sit near Belleville, Ont., and near New Hazelton in northwestern B.C.

With files from Wanyee Li and Jacob Lorinc

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